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Chairman William Kennard  
Office of the Secretary  
Federal Communications Commission  
The Portals

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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION

I strongly urge you to legalize low power broadcasting. OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

When our Constitution was signed, there was nothing comparable to today's media, but there was an understanding that accumulation of power was a matter to be taken very seriously. Concentrated media is a threat to free speech, free press, and free elections. Who owns the media, controls the agenda.

In 1992 Ben Bagdikian warned in his book, the Media Monopoly that media concentration was a danger, but in the Telecommunications Act of 1996 the Congress removed restrictions on media ownership. (Senator McCain pointed out in a recent interview with Mother Jones that the only interest not represented in that Bill was the public.)

Since the 1996 Telecommunications Bill 'deregulated' the industry, Westinghouse/CBS bought Infinity broadcasting for \$4.9 billion, Time Warner and Turner Broadcasting merged in a \$6.7 billion dollar deal, Nynex bought Bell Atlantic for \$22.1 billion, Rupert Murdoch's News Corp acquired full ownership of New World Communications Group for \$3 billion making it the largest TV station owner with 22 outlets, US West paid \$10.8 billion for control of Continental Cablevision, Gannet acquired Multimedia Entertainment for \$1.7 billion; British Telecommunications bought MCI for \$23 billion, and now, the largest yet, the merger of AT&T and TCI. The trend has accelerated.

You need only look to see that our information streams are now polluted.

Television news has become less and less informative. Pack journalism assures that we will see celebrity trivia, but only distorted or blocked public issues. There was hardly a ripple when the OJ Simpson trial pre-empted the State of the Union Address, no serious public discussion of Healthcare 'reform', no mention of the 1100 economists (including 6 Nobelprize) winners who opposed the balanced budget amendment, only discussion of regressive taxes, little discussion of expensive weapons systems which even the military doesn't want, scant coverage of ordinary workers, but plenty of coverage of President Clinton's affairs. By framing trivial issues large, and omitting real ones, real problems are kept from public view. By omitting certain information, the agenda is tightly controlled.

Not only has media been relieved of public responsibility, and become more concentrated, it has an agenda that only a fool would think is 'liberal'. All four television networks, radio, and newspaper chains are conservative activists. Two of our major networks are owned by major defense/nuclear contractors, a third has verified links to the CIA, and the fourth benefited magnificently from large gifts to Congressmen.

When Americans occupied Japan, they mandated that their media not become

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concentrated, because it would tend to fascism. We should consider again the mandate for ourselves. See Robert McChesney's book, Corporate Media and the Threat to Democracy.

In 1989, Brandon Centerwall of the University of Washington, Seattle, established that television leads to violence, particularly in children, and is a public health hazard. . From 1990 to 1994 there was a 22 percent increase in the rate of murder by teens aged 14 to 17. The FBI's most recent juvenile arrest records support this grim prediction: Weapons possession, aggravated assault, robbery, and murder all rose more than 50 percent from 1987 to 1996. James Alan Fox of Northeastern University's College of Criminal Justice warns that, without remediation, the juvenile crime rate seems likely to increase. This kind of information is rarely acknowledged in the media.

"An extraterrestrial being, newly arrived on Earth--scrutinizing what we mainly present to our children in television, radio, movies, newspapers, magazines, the comics, and many books -- might easily conclude that we are intent on teaching them murder, rape, cruelty, superstition, credulity, and consumerism. We keep at it, and through constant repetition many of them finally get it. What kind of society could we create if, instead we drummed into them science and a sense of hope." Carl Sagan. The Demon-Haunted World. Random House. 1995

"...Today's children, who watch more television than ever before (an average of 22,000 hours before graduating from high school), according to the Washington Post, also "suffer from an epidemic of attention-deficit disorders, diminished language skills, and poor reading comprehension." The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has discovered a direct link, and there is concern that TV might actually cause learning disorders. "Most [heavy viewing] kids", says psychologist Jerome Singer, "show lower information, lower reading recognition or readiness to reading, [and] lower reading levels." They also "tend to show lower imaginativeness, and less complex language usage". Very recent research in this field suggests that TV might in fact physically stunned the growth of a developing brain." from David Shenk's book, 'Data Smog, surviving the Information Glut'. If television has this powerful affect, there should be some accountability. Surely broadcasters should be held responsible for this crime against our children, as drug dealers are.

But no. For this misuse of existing spectrum, the Congress rewarded broadcasters with magnificent gifts. Although the industry is a health hazard, it was relieved of public responsibility, allowed to draft the Telecommunications Bill of 1996, and rewarded with a massive giveaway of new spectrum. The Telecommunications Act had no detectable consumer benefit, but has made most of us the target of telemarketers, price gouging (not only at pay phones), and no reductions of bills. Wireless phones, which are cheap and ubiquitous in Israel (even small children have them), are major expense items in the US.

As media cheer ever larger mergers, competition has yet to appear anywhere. Since television and other media account for most election expense, they account for a major component of campaign finance, and are the major beneficiaries of election expense. What you will hear about is the need for taxpayers to pay the bill to broadcasters for elections ... not that they have any obligation to the public, or that the public is indeed the ultimate owner of the broadcast spectrum. With the powerful media that we have today, elections may never again have real meaning.

Considering the small number of entities involved, communication can easily be brought under control of the national security state. Even the potential for that kind of control should trigger Anti-Trust action. But no. People have been robbed of much of the benefit of communication technology, advertisers may exploit and propagandize them, and broadcasters under no public responsibility.

Concentrated wealth and concentrated media are inherently authoritarian. Free speech and free elections may be an illusion from the past. Any hope of restoring true democracy, and with it a better breed of politicians, depends largely on stopping welfare to broadcasters, cleaning up our polluted information streams, and creating a better informed electorate.

Instead of concentrating information sources, we should decentralize them. Instead of making election messages expensive, we should make them free. Instead of exclusively corporate voices, we need someone to represent the public. Rather than shutting down low power broadcasters, we should encourage them.

Legalization of low power broadcasting could help to preserve democracy in the US.

Sincerely,

Ouresh Latif